

[Dunnell #16]

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[??]

Name: Robert Wilder

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Northfield

Topic: G. O. Dunnell, Hay, Grain Feed Man Paper 16

Mr. Dunnell was engaged in twisting a length of wire about the nob that operated the door of his piping hot heating stove in the little shack by the railroad track that serves as an office for his coal, feed and fertilizer business.

"I'm trying to make a handle out of this," he said. "The nob gets so plaguey hot that I burn my thumb and finger every time I open the stove door. It don't hurt me none. I don't feel it. But it's kinder burning a ridge in my skin - turns it all brown - and it don't smell too good. Guess I'll begin to feel it before long if I don't do something about it.

"Got to do something about my shoes, too. That's why I got boots on today. My wife says last night, 'You got nails in your shoes!' I says, 'I ain't neither.' She holds up one of my stockings. And, by gosh, they was a whole ring of holes around the heel. She says, 'I'll mend 'em this once. But if you don't fix those nails, the next time I'll throw 'em away. 'By gosh, I hadn't felt no nails. But them holes didn't come there all by 'em selves. Guess my skin is tough, or somethin'.

"You see that feller that was just in here? He was in looking for a job. I told him about Richards wanting his barn tore down. That feller has a wife and family and I felt kinder

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sorry for him, so I saw Richards myself. They was willing 2 to pay him forty cents an hour - him and a helpers too. But this feller stuck out for fifty, and it just didn't figger out. 'Course, if that feller could tear the barn down in record time, they could pay fifty. But just looking at him, they knew he couldn't so's forty was the best they could do - prob'ly safer at thirty five. They wanted the barn down when the money run out - not half down. And the feller wouldn't take it on contract. He had to have cash money once a week. Well, Richards is going to let the old barn stand - says it'll blow down next wind, prob'ly - and now that feller comes back cryin' to me.

"I don't understand it. Seems to me that I'd take what work I could find to do, at the price folks was willing to pay. Somebody's put ideas in that feller's head that if he stuck out for fifty cents an hour he'd get it. And getting fifty cents an hour while he was working would give him time to go hunting, or somethin', the rest of the time. Well, maybe that's so. But the catch comes in getting anybody to pay more than they can afford for labor. Either they don't hire any, and let it go - let things run down at the heel - or they do it themselves. The painters and paper hangers tried it - asked a dollar an hour. Said it was union wages, and as they belonged to a union they had to get it. Well, we done without wall paper. That is, we bought ready mixed paint and right on top the old wall paper - makes a good wall, too. And 3 we got ready mixed paint and painted our own houses. 'Course I shingled mine. Used then nice, silvery grey shingles that come all stained and never have to be painted. With that all done, we can paint the doors and winders and around the trim ourselves. Don't have to hire no painters at even ten cents an hour. I s'pose some would say that we took the food out of some nice family's mouth. But nobody's starved in this town that I've heard off, 'cept years ago when we had a good Christian at the head of the welfare board, and old feller did starve to death on Northfield Mountain. No sir! Those painters are still living. But they ain't gettin' no dollar an hour. Maybe one or two of 'em are on the welfare. If they are, I s' pose I'm paying out in taxes what I might have spent to get my house painted. One of them indirect tax burdens yer hear of. But I'll bet yer I'm not paying so much of then painters , ' keep myself as I would be hiring 'em at a dollar an hour. An'

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if I am, I don't care! I'd rather pay for their keep in taxes than have the damn fools around under foot!

"There! I guess that will do for a handle. 'taint exactly handsome, but I guess I can open the door with it - if I think to. When yer get into the habit of doing a think, it's pretty hard to remember to do something else. And I s'pose I'll be something like Uncle Anse Howard, and take the dum thing off there so's I can burn my thumb handy again, one of these days.

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"Uncle Anse got permotted (promoted) into having an oil burner in his stove. Same stove he'd had for years. But he couldn't break himself of a habit he had. He'd get to talking, and before he'd think, he'd open the stove and squirt about a pint of terbaccer juice on to the oil burner. 'Course 't would sputter. And some times it'd go out. His wife didn't like it either. Would give him hell. But it didn't do no good. Finally, he give up. He made 'em take the oil burner out and went back to burning coal. Said he'd spit in that stove all his life, as did his father before him. And, by God, for the few remainin' years of his life he was goin' to spit comfortable.

"Fifty cents an hour! I can remember when they used to work for ten cents an hour. And ten hours a day! That was a dollar, and what the town paid for working on the roads. Someway, they raised the price to a dollar and a quarter a day, and all the farmers wanted to stop farming and go to work on the roads.

"Let me tell you farming ain't what it used to be around here. You'll prob'ly live to see it - I figure it'll take twenty or twenty-five years - but you'll see chain farms. We have all kinds of chain stores now, things that's really chain factories. And you'll see chain farms. Strings run by some rich fellers that'll pay hourly wages and have a regular pay day every week. There'll be someone to lay out the work, and the man will do as they're told -

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just like factory workers. And the small farmer won't have a chance any more than the small manufacturer had when he got up against big business. He won't be able to guarantee a supply of stuff all sorted and graded, so he'll lose the market. Maybe the fellers that belong to cooperatives will get by. But I'm talking about the small farmers the 'rugged individualist' feller.

"Some rich fellers bought up farms over in the Berkshires, I hear, around Pittsfield, but I guess that's mostly fancy stock. One feller from Greenfield bought up a few in heath, north of the Center, on the road to the right of that cemetery that sits on the top of the world. Feller's name was Pratt. " Well, Pratt had some brand new ideas about farming. He kept about all the kinds of tame animals they is;-sheep and cows and mules even. He built a great, big house with wide piazzas that he held dances on, and fellers with plug hats used to come up there from Greenfield to dance and drink rum. One night they decided they'd ride the mules. So they all got on the mules and rode around. It was pitch dark, and somethin' scared the mules so that they run. They run into an orchard. And when they run under the trees the limbs scraped whoever was riding 'em off their backs. And they didn't find some of 'em 'til daylight next morning. " Mr. Dunnell almost doubled up chuckling.

"Now, that ain't the way the ordinary hill farmer czrries carries on. We used to have dances, too. And most generally they lasted 'til daylight. Then we'd have to take our girls home - an' sometimes that 6 meant driving a good many miles - then get out of our best clothes and go to work without any sleep at all. 'Course we had hard cider, and cider brandy, too, sometimes. But no decent young feller ever got drunk at a dance. After we got married we stayed home and behaved ourselves. We didn't go wearing plug hats and riding mules in orchards after dark.

"They was a party, or a dance, up beyond our place one night. My wife and I heard the teams going by after we had gone to bed. And once in a while somebody would yell at us, the way young people do. We knew 'em all, of course, and they knew us. The next morning, when I got up, I couldn't find my milk paisl pails . I allus washed 'em out after I

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had finished using 'em the night before, and turned 'em bottom side up on the cooler in the shed. My wife was never satisfied with the way I washed 'em, so they were handy there for her to wash, too. But this morning the pails was gone. 'Course I thought right away that some of the young fellers coming back from the dance had hid 'em to have fun with me. So I started looking for tracks. While I was looking I saw a clothes pin. And a little ways further on, another. I picked 'em up, and hollers to my wife about her being kinder careless in the way she looked after clothespins. I supposed, of course, that the children had been playing with 'em. But she let out a squawk that all her washing was gone. She'd taken it off line the evening before as she thought it might rain before morning. And had left it in a basket on the porch. She'd dropped the pins right in 7 with the clothes, expecting to put them in their bag when she folded the clothes and dampened 'em before ironing. 'Well!' I says, 'I don't find no tracks where a team has stopped, so I guess whoever's been around here raising hell must a been aroot afoot . I see it rained a bit in the night, so I guess I won't have no trouble tracking him.'

"I had to let the milking go. And I was getting a little mad by this time. Taking my milk cans might be a joke on me. But taking my wife's clothes want wan't no joke that - I could see. And hiding the pails where I couldn't find 'em quick enough so's I could milk the cows at the regular time, want funny either.

"Sure enough, I found tracks. And they want wan't of anybody I knowed. There were two men. And one of 'em seemed to have something wrong with his foot, for he toed way in with that - the other seemed to be all right. So's to make it easy for me[-?] I found another clothespin. And a little farther along I found another. After awhile I come to a sand bank, near Old Doc. Thomas' house. The ground was pretty well littered with clothespins. I figured they'd stopped there to divide up the load better, and that I wouldn't find no more clothespins along the road. 'Course I knew which way they went 'cause they was only one road. I'd just started when a young feller met me with a team. Seems he'd been down to [Griswoldville?], or somewheres, to carry his girl home, and was just getting back. He said

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he hadn't seen nobody, but when he and his girl come away from the dance they saw that somebody had built a fire out on a sandy piece behind a stone wall.

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And that held show me where 't was. So I got in, and we went out there. Sure enough, the embers was still smoking. And I could tell by the tracks that they was the same ones that robbed me. Seemed like there was a woman and another man that they'd met here. And that meant that the tracks of the wagon they had must have been an express wagon's tracks. For they all went off riding - basket of clothes and all - as fur as we could see.

"When we come to the fork of the road we took the opposite fork from that that the young feller had travelled, 'cause we saw from the marks that's the way the express wagon had went. Finally, I saw an old wood road where the express wagon had turned off. And looking a little closer I saw it standing behind some bushes, a little off the road. I clumb out and went up the wood road. The young feller hitched his team before he follered. They had a fire. And one of the biggest women I ever see was messing up something in a kettle on it. I didn't see nobody else around, 'cept the feller that toes in. He was stretched out sleeping. And he had funny shoes on. Laying there on his back the left foot toed in.

" 'Where's my milk pails?' " I hollers.

"The man didn't wake up nor nothin, but the woman jumps and turns 'round. I tells again 'Where's my milk pails?' and she pointed at the wagon pop-eyed and her chin hanging on her chest. 'Where's the clothes and the clothes basket?' A tough looking guy came from 9 from somewhere, no hat, a toothpick hanging out of his mouth and his hands in his pockets. 'What's that to you?' he said. I'm a constable,' I says. 'And you'd better hand 'em over. Else I'll have to take you to headquarters,' I says. 'don't know what you're talking about,' says the man. 'We ain't done nothin.' 'No?,' I says, stepping back sudden and pulling the canvas cover off the express wagon, 'What yer doing with my milk pails?' 'them yours?' the feller asked. An' I guess he was really surprised. 'Yes,' I says, 'And I want the

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clothes you took, too, and the clothes basket.' He said he didn't know anything about 'em, I says, " ' All right, I'm sorry, but you'll have to tell it to the judge. " ' At this the woman began to squawk. The young feller that come with me was standing in the road where they didn't know how many they was of us.

"The woman says, "The boys took your pails because they wanted 'em to put blueberries in. We thought we could pick some and make a little money. They took the clothes, too, and I tried to have 'em back. But they said the folks they took 'em from was rich, 'cause their porch had a marble floor, and they wouldn't do it."

"Our porch floor was made of that white stone you get in the fields up that way. Some of the slabs was real sizable - eight or ten foot long - but shucks, 't was only field stone. Huh? Maybe 't is marble, but 't ain't wuth nothing but the labor.

"Where's the clothes?" I wanted to know. "And where's my 10 basket?" They pointed to the feller that was asleep. I fetched him a kick in the ribs, 'cause I thought he was bluffing - making believe be was asleep. "Wake up and hear the bird's sing!" I hollers. He wakes up all right. "Where's them clothes?" He pointed to the wagon. "Get 'em." He got up and limped to the wagon, pulled out a funny looking suitcase and dropped it in front of me. "Open it up!" I says. He seemed trying to make me bend over. "I said for you to open it!," I yells. He spread his hands out sideways and cocked his head on one side. "All right," I says, "Come on the whole bunch of her, off to jail!" The woman squawks again. And the lame feller gets a sight of my friend in the road. 'Fore I could stop him he goes ploughing through them brush like a deer. "Take him!" I hollers. "Take him dead or alive. Bring back his scalp!"

"Well sir, you'd had ter laughed to see how scared them others was. They opened the feller's suitcase and got out my clothes. They done 'em all up nice in a sheet. And they told me where my basket was too. Said they threw it over the wall where they stopped and had the fire. I made 'em promise that they'd never come around those parts again. Told 'em if

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they did I'd arrest 'em. And that I'd arrest 'em any way if I didn't find the basket where they said 't was.

"It was there all right. So I telephoned my wife from the first 'phone I come to. Told her I had everything but one pair o'pants. And maybe a petticoat, or somethin' that the woman was wearing.

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"Me a constable? No, I never was a constable in my life. But I didn't think it did any harm to tell them people I was. By the time I had tracked them people, sworn out a complaint and found a constable, they'd a been in Californy, or somewheres. I wanted my stuff. I didn't care nothing about putting them people in jail as a valuable lesson to the public.

"T wan't for a good many years afterwards that I found out what them people might have been. They was a marble monument built to Jim Fisk up to Brattleboro, and the sculptor, Larkin Mead, used to live in Chesterfield. 'Course, he didn't do it, but the business men that sold the monuments used to get Eyetalians over here from Italy. They'd tell 'em about the good wages and how the kids could have free schools and everything, and get the best workmen to come. But when the job was finished, after the businessmen had used them good Eyetalian workmen, they'd turn 'em loose. And they could work with a pick and shovel or starve for all the business men cared. I think probably they was stone cutters coming down from the quarries up north to some new ones they was opening near North Adams - probably the Hoosac Tunnell. 'Cause the woman said they was going to North Adams. And the poor devils probably didn't have the rail road fare. Probably made some kind of a dicker with the man that owned the horse - or who'd stole it - the man I didn't see.

"Lots of people read detective stories to amuse themselves. But up in the hills we don't bother to waste our time reading. When we have some detecting to do, we go out and do it. Have the excitment ourselves, not read about somebody's else having it. "